DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 233 332 CS 007 283

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TITLE A Survey of Reading Habits with Suggested Instructional Strategies: Elderly Adults.
PUB DATE 8 May 83
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (28th, Anaheim, CA, May 2-6, 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Literature Appreciation; Motivation; Needs Assessment; *Older Adults; *Reading Attitudes; *Reading Habits; Reading Instruction; *Reading Research

ABSTRACT

The reading habits of 49 elderly adults were surveyed, using the SERA inventory, to examine two hypotheses: there is no difference among elderly adults' perceptions of their reading habits as related to factors of reading skill, preference, physical functioning, attention span/concentration, and emotional well-being, and there are no significant differences between married and single and between male and female elderly adults regarding their perceptions of their reading habits. The results disproved both hypotheses, indicating that the elderly subjects (1) were not physically incapacitated (they had usable vision, could hold and turn pages of books and newspapers, and could attend to and concentrate on their reading); (2) did not have to read and were not too busy to read; and (3) expressed a need for instruction in determining the author's purpose, developing critical and evaluative reading skills, understanding government documents, and using the library efficiently. The results suggest that a strong motivational element must also be included in reading instruction for the elderly. A subsequent three-phase instructional program based on what might be done for the subjects in the study addresses the issue of the amount of reading done by the elderly, focuses on opportunities for sharing reading and reading related experiences, and offers suggestions for addressing specifically diagnosed reading difficulties. (HTH)

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A SURVEY OF READING HABITS WITH SUGGESTED INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES: ELDERLY ADULTS

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Paper presented at the Twenty-eighth Annual Convention, International Reading Association, Anaheim, CA. May 5, 1983.

CS 207283

A SURVEY OF READING HABITS WITH SUGGESTED INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES: ELDERLY ADULTS

"In less than 30 years one person in every five will be over 65" (Luskin, 1980, p.4).

The growing population of elderly persons brings with it concern for maintaining, even enhancing, the quality of extended lifespans. One aspect of quality of life is active participation in a variety of activities. While young adults spend a significant part of their day engaged in jobs or professional endeavors, later life brings retirement and additional time that must be planned for. For many of the elderly this additional time presents a problem -- how to spend it in an interesting, productive or esthetically satisfying manner.

Spending time reading appears to offer at least a partial solution to the problem of using the extra time that accompanies retirement. Robinson (1977) studied time-use habits of more than 2000 subjects, aged 18-65 and found reading to be a significant factor in the quality of life. Other studies support the importance of the role played by reading in the lives of elderly participants (Sharon, 1974; Wolf, 1977). Wilson (1977) cited one example of how a group of socially and vocationally active elderly persons met weekly to discuss commonly read material. These elderly women shared life as well as reading experiences and through these sessions they established a kind of positive structure that is often missing in the lives of solitary elderly people. Moreover, Wolf (1977) concluded that there was "strong evidence of the importance of reading for the older person who seeks entertainment, knowledge, the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity, cultural development, and companionship" (p.16).

This paper presents the results of a survey of elderly adults' reading habits. It further offers suggestions of instructional strategies that grew out of self-reported habits of the adults under study. A major purpose of the study is to describe a procedure used to deterime how to be helpful in assisting the surveyed adults with their specific reading needs.

HYPOTHESES

1. There are no differences among elderly adults' perceptions of their reading habits as related to factors of reading skill, preference, physical functioning, attention span/concentration and emotional well-being.

2. There are no significant differences between married and single, and between male and female elderly adults regarding their perceptions of their reading habits.

SUBJECTS

Forty-nine elderly subjects, with a mean age of 67.27 from Western Pennsylvania participated in this study. Twenty-six were Black and 23 where White. Twenty-one of the subjects attended the same church and 28 attended a senior citizens recreational hall. Sixty-seven percent (67%), 10%, and 22% respectively reported blue collar, white collar, and other as their current occupation or occupation at the time of their retirement. The other category refers to homemaker. For the most part the educational level for the subjects clustered around having attended high school (33%) and having completed less than eighth grade (22%). The next largest number (20%) of subjects reported that they had graduated from the eighth grade. A few (14%) reported that they had graduated from high school. Six percent (6%) attended college, 2% graduated from college and 2% indicated post-college work. Sex and marital status were used to group the subjects. Widowed subjects were grouped as single. There were 18 male subjects and 31 female subjects. Grouping of these subjects by marital status netted 20 married subjects and 29 single subjects.

DATA GATHERING INSTRUMENT

The SERA inventory (Kingston, no date) is an untimed 76 item inventory designed to describe reading habits. Items on the inventory were not classified into specific categories. For interpretation purposes, the present researchers classified the items into the following five reading habits categories:

1) Reading skill -- includes comprehension, word identification, rate and flexibility, reading strategy use and information location;
2) Preference -- includes types of material read, deciding to read or not, financial investment, likes and dislikes of reading and change of habits in reference to reading;
3. Physical Functioning -- includes vision and kinesthesia;
4) Attention Span/Concentration -- refers to being able to focus attention and concentrate on material to be read; and
5) Emotional Well-being -- refers to support from others as well as the embarrassment felt when others know that an individual has difficulty reading.

Response to items on the inventory are answered in terms of Agree (A) or Disagree (D). If one often or usually did or felt as an item suggested -- the letter A would be marked. On the other hand if one rarely or never did or felt as an item suggested -- the letter D would be marked. Positive responses (as determined by users or interpreters) to items on the inventory could be indicated by marking the letter A and sometimes indicated by marking the letter D. Likewise, negative responses (as determined by users or interpreters) to items on the inventory could be indicated by marking the letter A and at other times by marking the letter D. In other words some items are stated in a positive form and others in a negative form. Therefore, parametric assumptions could not be met. SERA is a nonparametric inventory.

DESIGN

In this study a 2 x 2 factorial design was employed. One observation of groups of elderly subjects was made to record their perceptions of their reading habits on the SERA inventory. Responses to the inventory were recorded as either Agree or Disagree.

PROCEDURES

Based on their stated preferences, the administration of the SERA inventory varied among subjects. Some subjects preferred having the inventory read to them and/or having someone circle their choices. Others were given the inventory in groups of 3 or 4 to read while they circled their own responses.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Results of the study were determined from the percentage of responses to individual items by the total group on the SERA inventory. The researchers considered the percentages to be of practical significance when 50% or more of the subjects disagreed with an item. Further, a chi square analysis was employed to determine statistically significant differences between married subjects and single subjects, and between male subjects and female subjects.

Hypothesis I

There are no differences among elderly adults' perceptions of their reading habits as related to factors of reading skills, preference, physical functioning, attention span/concentration and emotional well-being.

Reading Skill

Twenty-four items were classified under the Reading Skill category. That category was subdivided into five areas of reading. Comprehension, the first area, consisted of twelve items. Of those twelve items 58% to 83% of the

population disagreed with five. Specifically, 58% reported that they could not determine the author's purpose; 62% believed what they read in books and newspapers; 69% could not read government documents without difficulty; 70% missed the point of what they read; and 83% could not understand directions for filing tax returns.

Word Identification, the second area had six items. Data from two items were within the 50% and above cut-off. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of the subjects did not spell out unknown words; and 60% of the subjects did not mistake some words for different words.

Rate and Flexibility, the third area, included one item. That item was above the 50% level. It showed that 62% of the subjects indicated that they did vary their reading rate.

Reading Strategy Use, the fourth area, consisted of three items. Responses for two of those items were above 50%. Fifty-two percent (52%) reported that they did not frequently overlook or reread lines as they read. Ninety-one percent (91%) said that they did not move their lips or tongue as they read.

Information Location, the fifth area, included two items. Fifty-nine (59%) of the subjects reported that they did know how to use a library card catalog; and 71% indicated that it did not take them longer than most people to locate information in a telephone book.

Preferences

Thirty-one items were classified under the Preference category. That category was subdivided into five areas. For the first area, Types of Material, there were five items. None of the responses to those items met the 50% and above criterion. The second area, Use of Time, had nine items. Of the responses to the nine items, five met the 50% and above criterion.

Specifically 55% of the subjects reported that they did read recreationally more than most people their age; 72% did not have a need to read at least one hour per day, and did not have an up-to-date library card; 78% were not too busy to read; and 81% did not go to the library once a month.

Financial Investment was the third area with five items. Four of those five items' responses met the 50% and above criterion. Fifty percent (50%) reported that they would not read more magazines if they could afford them. Sixty-nine percent (69%) did not subscribe to two or more magazines. Sixty-eight percent (68%) did not have fifty or more good books in their home; and 74% did not buy at least five books per year.

Likes and Dislikes was the fourth area with seven items. Four of the items' responses met the 50% and above criterion. More specifically, 59% disagreed that "Most books and magazines are intended for younger people." Additionally, 62% liked paperback books; 75% said that reading does not bore them; and 74% have liked reading most of their lives.

Habit Change, the fifth area, consisted of five items. Two of those items' responses met the 50% and above criterion. As noted, 65% did not enjoy rereading stories from earlier years; and that same percentage (65%) did not reread stories without initial recognition.

Physical Functioning

Thirteen items were classified under the Physical Functioning category. Of the responses to the thirteen items, ten met the 50% and above criterion. Fifty-two percent (52%) reported that print on glossy paper was not hard for them to read; and 53% said that print blurs after 15 to 20 minutes. Seventy-seven percent (77%) did not need a magnifying glass for reading; 85% did not find it difficult to turn pages of books, nor to turn pages of newspapers, nor did they point to words while reading. Eighty-seven percent (87%) did not use

their finger or hand while reading; and 89% did not move their head while reading. Ninety-one percent (91%) did not get headaches if they read for more than fifteen or twenty minutes. Lastly, 96% said that it was not difficult for them to hold a book when reading.

Attention Span/Concentration

Three items were classified under the Attention Span/Concentration category. Responses to one item met the 50% and above criterion. Here, 69% of the subjects reported that they did not have trouble concentrating as they read.

Emotional Well-being

The Emotional Well-being category consisted of five items that were subdivided into two areas. The first area , Embarrassment, included two items. One of those items' responses met the 50% and above criterion. It showed that 74% of the subjects indicated that they were not embarrassed about their reading. The second area, Support, had three items. One of those items' responses met the 50% and above criterion. It indicated that 59% of the subjects reported that their friends and family were not interested in hearing about what they had read.

The analysis showed that 50% and more of the subjects did disagree with many of the items, thereby establishing practical significance. Hypothesis I was rejected.

Hypothesis 2

There are no significant differences between married and single, and male and female elderly adults regarding their perception of their reading habits.

Married and Single Subjects. Responses to each of the 76 items on the

SERA inventory were subjected to chi square analysis to determine differences between married subjects and single subjects and to determine differences between male subjects and female subjects. Significant differences (see Table I) were reported for four of the items for married and single subjects. Items 27, "I subscribe to a daily newspaper" and item 53, "We subscribe to two or more magazines," classified under the Financial Investment area in the Preferences category were significant with 1 df at $p. < .01$ and $p. < .05$ levels respectively. Item 17, "Most of the time reading bores me," classified under the State Likes and Dislikes areas in the Preferences category was significant with 1 df at $p. < .05$ level. Finally, item 45 "I use my fingers or hand to help me read better," classified in the Physical category was significant with 1 df at $p. < .05$ level.

Male and Female Subjects. Significant differences (see Table II) were reported for two items in relation to differences between male subjects and female subjects. Item 6, "I can read most advertisements without difficulty" classified in the Comprehension area under the Reading Skill category was significant with 1 df at $p. < .05$ level. Item 32, "I frequently overlook words while reading" classified in the Reading Strategy Use area under the Reading Skill category was also significant with 1 df at $p. < .05$ level.

Hypothesis 2 was rejected at the $p. < .01$ and $p. < .05$ levels of significance.

Hypothesis I: Major Findings

Findings for the Reading Skill category are reported below.

(1) Comprehension -- Responses in this area indicated that subjects experienced difficulty in:

. determining the authors's purpose

. distinguishing fact from fiction

. reading government documents

. understanding directions for filing tax returns

TABLE I

Chi Square Analysis for Married and Single Subjects

Item	X	df	Significance
27	8.24561	1	p. < .01
53	5.53896	1	p. < .05
17	5.42623	1	p. < .05
45	4.45994	1	p. < .05

TABLE II

Chi Square Analysis for Male and Female Subjects

Item	X	df	Significance
6	6.57609	1	p. < .05
32	4.06292	1	p. < .05

(2) Word Identification -- Responses in this area indicated that subjects:

. did not spell out unknown words

. did not misread words

(3) Rate and Flexibility -- Responses in this area indicated that subjects did vary their reading rate.

(4) Reading Strategy Use -- Responses in this area indicated that subjects:

. did not overlook or reread lines

. did not engage in lip or tongue movement

(5) Information Location -- Responses in this area indicated that subjects:

. could not use library cards

. can locate information in telephone books

Findings for the Preference Category are reported below.

(1) Types of Material -- Responses in this area indicated that subjects:

. did not read recreationally

. did not have to read

. did not have an up-to-date library card

. were not too busy to read

. did not go to the library at least once a month

(2) Financial Investment -- Responses in this area indicated that subjects did not own an enormous amount of reading material, specifically they:

. would not read more if they could afford it

. did not subscribe to two or more magazines

. did not have 50 or more books

. did not buy five books per year

(3) Likes and Dislikes -- Responses in this area indicated that:

. most reading materials were not for younger people

. subjects liked paperbacks books

. subjects were not bored with reading

. subjects have liked reading most of their lives

(4) Habit Change -- Responses in this area indicated that:

. subjects did not enjoy rereading stories

. subjects did not reread without initial recognition

Findings for the Physical Functioning category are reported below. It appeared that subjects did not experience difficulties that interfered with their reading. Specifically, they indicated that:

. print on glossy paper was not hard to read

. print did blur after 15 or 20 minutes of reading

. they could turn pages of books and newspapers without difficulty

. they did not use their finger or hand while reading

. they did not move their heads while reading

. they did not get headaches while reading

. they could hold books without difficulty

A finding from the Attention/Span Concentration category indicated that subjects did not have trouble concentrating as they read.

Findings from the Emotional category indicated that subjects were not embarrassed about their reading; also that their friends and family were not interested in hearing about what they had read.

Hypothesis 2: Major Findings

Another inspection of the data that reported significant differences from the Preferences and Physical Functioning categories regarding married and single subjects, revealed that:

- more married (100%) than single (66.7%) subjects subscribed to daily newspapers
- more married (60%) than single (25.9%) subjects subscribed to two or more magazines
- more married (90%) than single (59.3%) subjects indicated that reading did not bore them
- more single (96.2%) than married (75%) subjects indicated that they did not use their finger or hand while reading.

(These percentages were based on 20 married and 29 single subjects.)

Likewise, significant differences data for male and female subjects showed that:

- more female (93.5%) than male (64.7%) subjects could read advertisements without difficulty.
- more male (70.6%) than female (40%) subjects overlooked words while reading.

(These percentages were based on 18 male and 31 female subjects.)

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

An interpretation of their self-reported data suggested that elderly subjects in this study were not physically incapacitated; i.e., they had usable vision and they could hold and turn pages of books and newspapers without difficulty. Also, when they read they could attend to and concentrate on their reading.

The data further indicated that elderly subjects did not have to read nor were they too busy to read, yet need for instruction in (1) determining the author's purpose, (2) developing critical and evaluative reading skills, (3) understanding and appropriately using government documents, and (4) learning to make efficient use of the library was evident. However, instruction in these areas will likely have little impact if the subjects do not view reading as an important source of practical strength and enrichment in their lives. Kingston (1981) suggested that even the presence of reading skill does not assure that elderly adults will read to enrich their lives. He found that many who could read did not. Also, even when the elderly who had limited literacy skills were given instruction to develop their skills they failed to apply the skill without direct guidance. Thus, reading instruction for the elderly must include a strong motivational element. One such element might be to inform the elderly that "reading activities can contribute to helping [them] adjust to changes in their retirement years" (Wolf 1977, p.6).

Even though the subjects in this study reported that their friends and family were not interested in hearing about what they read, it may be important for those who work with the elderly to demonstrate the purposes reading can serve. The elderly can be shown (1) how they already use reading as an aid for socialization, (2) how they have solved some of their day-to-day problems, and (3) how they have enriched their lives. When they become aware of the impact that reading has already had on their lives, they may then be ready to appropriately engage in formal reading improvement activities. Or, at least may be willing to continue reading with a greater appreciation for its worth.

INSTRUCTIONAL IMPLICATIONS

While the data in this study lead to conclusions similar to those drawn in other studies, the instructional strategies suggested here are based on what might be done for the adults who participated in this study. The implications are presented in three phases. The initial phase addresses the issue of the amount of reading done by elderly adults. The second phase focuses on opportunities for sharing reading and reading related experiences. And, the third phase offers suggestions for addressing specifically diagnosed reading difficulties.

Phase I. Reading does or can play a major role in the lives of elderly persons, yet they are not likely to read as much or as often as they could (Sharon, 1974). Therefore, increased reading activity opportunities for reading must be provided. One way to do this is to arrange locations and times for regular meetings. Wilson (1977) pointed out that groups of elderly persons can come together to share common reading experience as a way to satisfy their need for social activity and structure as well as to establish and extend reading behavior.

Phase II. Elderly adults need not spend all of their time with others of their age group. They can come together with people of all ages who share interest in a hobby, sport, or other experiences. One example of this is the involvement of a cross-section of people playing games. The nature of the games played would be determined by the interest and vigor of the participants. Cullen (1970) reported that adults and children in Liverpool, England, became productively involved in playing games that included problem solving tasks and engaging in other activities that seemed to make them more amenable to more formal involvement in learning and reading.

Phase III. When members of the group seem to need special help or request it they may be assessed using any of the variety of standarized instruments or informal measures available (See Karlsen, Madden and Gardner, 1971; Scales and Biggs, 1983). The adults needs and interests can be pursued in a personalized and satisfactory manner. The following approaches would seem to offer assistance to readers in this study.

A. Provide popular periodic literature to assure sufficient reading practice and to teach comprehension and word identification skills as needed. Popular local and national newspapers, magazines and newsletters have been shown to be highly motivating for readers requiring assistance in such areas as using meaningful word parts to identify words and critical reading (La Sasso, 1983).

B. Engage readers in individual or small group language experience activities. These language experiences are effective because: (1) the method is refreshingly different from those they were initially exposed to in school, (2) the approach is easily tailored to individuals, (3) other language skills can also be reinforced at the same time, and (4) needs of many different literacy levels can be addressed in the same group (Smith, 1980). Also, elderly adults can generate some of their own highly interesting reading material that could be used to develop a variety of needed skills (Meltzer, 1979).

C. Set aside time for sustained reading sessions where readers may choose to read specific selections in common or to read personally selected materials based on individual needs and interest. Readers may then choose (or not choose) to share information through discussion.

Finally, elderly adults have used reading to enrich their lives in ways that are esthetically satisfying and informative. Even though it was found that the adults in this study did differ among themselves in their perceptions regarding selected reading habits, many would seem to be able to benefit from increased reading activities that would allow them to spend their post time-retirement years in a more interesting and more productive manner.

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